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Make-or-Break Terrorism Choice Coming Up Soon

Once again the Reagan administration has decided not to use force against the mad colonel of Tripoli, yet those in the U.S. who favor stronger action have been muted in their protests. Some of them think Muammar Qadhafi has become so outrageous that when he next sneezes, even our persistently ambivalent government will be forced to act. Others among the hard-liners are quiet because they are just plain depressed.

The administration responded to the killings at the Rome and Vienna airports with a 10-day crescendo of pronouncements. First, officials made it clear the U.S. was not against Israeli retaliation.

Next, the administration accused Col. Qadhafi of a big role in the airport attacks, and began supplying details. Then it started asking U.S. allies to help hit back somehow. By the time of this week's presidential news conference, Libya was clearly Topic Number One.

Then, at the climax of the drum roll, the president made his announcement: The U.S. was ordering out of Libya those Americans still there. We would cut almost all of our sparse commercial ties with Tripoli, excluding foreign subsidiaries of U.S. firms. And Mr. Reagan made clear just what he thought of Col. Qadhafi: "He's not only a barbarian, but he's flaky."

Hard-liners were not thrilled. "This is confirmation," one insider said, "of the lack of seriousness in the foreign policy

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that we produce. When you are out to retaliate against a government like Libya's, you can't do it through economic sanctions against the nation as a whole. You have to move against the regime itself."

Another analyst carried the argument further. "There are certainly people in the U.S. government contemplating covert action against Col. Qadhafi," he said. "The trouble is that it isn't covert anymore. Why? Because, among other things, this fall the Washington Post published a front-page story announcing that Congress had

approved a covert-action program against him."

The reasons why the government has found it so hard to act may be even more intractable than these analyses suggest.

The administration had several main reasons, according to reports, for not striking at Libya this time. For one thing, U.S. policy is to strike back only when we have a target definitely connected with the terrorist attack we are answering. In this case our intelligence could not meet the standard.

Further, some feared, our planes might be knocked out by Libyan SAM-5s. U.S. citizens still in Libya might become hostages. The strike could stir a frenzy of anti-Americanism in Arab countries.

These are all very real, concrete short-term costs that an unfriendly world might impose on us. Still, when governments are making hard choices like this one, the people who insist that the short-term worries stay at the front of everyone's mind are the foreign-policy equivalent of the accountants in the green eye shades.

People who deal in U.S. public policy today, whatever their ideologies, are especially receptive to the accountants' cautions. Partly this is because we are the children of PPBS, the planning-programming-budgeting system that bright young managers brought to government in the 1960s. They said that with this new, rigorous system for assessing policies we could get better control of public decisions.

These hotshots brought us into the world of costs and benefits, efficiency and effectiveness, options and escalation. Their method has served many sorts of policies, but its language is mostly unsuited for thinking broadly about political action or mobilizing support for a risky venture.

Once, when Vice Adm. Lord Nelson was being warned that a battle plan of his was dangerous for his battleships, he is said to have answered, "Battleships are made to be sunk." Was Nelson a maniac? Hardly; he was simply telling his critics that the contemplation of risk had paralyzed them. But there is not much room for this style of persuasive speech in today's government conference rooms.

Closer to home, the offices of the secretary of state in Washington have just been renovated with a sort of grace that would have been congenial to our first secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson. The entry hall is now being redone, and one tough design obstacle has been surmounted: The hall will feature French doors that look welcoming despite their thick, heavy bullet-proof glass.

The glass will, thank goodness, make our officials less tempting targets for terrorists. Still, it calls to mind the memory of President Jefferson sending a U.S. naval

expedition against the terrorists of his day, the Barbary pirates. Had Jefferson's cost-benefit calculator gone on the fritz? No, he was simply measuring these costs and benefits in the longer run. Yet if he argued the same position today around the decision-making table, in a minute someone would mutter to his neighbor, "Dangerous, that man. Loose cannon if I ever saw one."

Our allies won't support our economic sanctions against Libya. Why should they run big risks for the small measures we've taken? Our Qadhafi problem seems to call for a combination of moves against the regime and military steps as a general announcement of our intent, but we have to unload a train load of conceptual baggage from recent years before we can even begin to think about action.

Some people hope the next incident will push the U.S. over the edge. More likely, the terrorists and their friends will arrange to keep the next attack just below the threshold at which the U.S. would be truly compelled to act. The odds are that we will go through our agonizing debate yet again.